



Office of  
the Schools  
Adjudicator

## Determination

**Case reference:** VAR2520

**Admission authority:** Cambridgeshire County Council for Meridian Primary School, Comberton

**Date of decision:** 13 December 2024

## Determination

In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Cambridgeshire County Council for Meridian Primary School for September 2025.

I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the reception year in 2025/26 will be 30.

## The referral

1. Cambridgeshire County Council (the local authority) has referred a proposal for a variation to the admission arrangements for September 2025 (the arrangements) for Meridian Primary School (the school) to the adjudicator. The school is a community school for children aged four to eleven in Comberton, a village located four miles to the south west of Cambridge.
2. The proposed variation is to reduce the published admission number (PAN) from 45 to 30 for admissions to reception year (YR) in 2025/26.

## Jurisdiction and procedure

3. The referral was made to me in accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act) which deals with variations to determined arrangements. Paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of the School Admissions Code (the Code) say (in so far as relevant here):

“3.6 Once admission arrangements have been determined for a particular school year, they cannot be revised by the admission authority unless such revision is

necessary to give effect to a mandatory requirement of this Code, admissions law, a determination of the Adjudicator or any misprint in the admission arrangements. Admission authorities may propose other variations where they consider such changes to be necessary in view of a major change in circumstances. Such proposals **must** be referred to the Schools Adjudicator for approval, and the appropriate bodies notified. Where the local authority is the admission authority for a community or voluntary controlled school, it **must** consult the governing body of the school before making any reference.

3.7 Admission authorities **must** notify the appropriate bodies of all variations”.

4. The local authority has provided me with confirmation that the appropriate bodies have been notified. I have seen confirmation that the school’s governing body supports the proposed variation. I find that the appropriate procedures were followed, and I am also satisfied that the proposed variation is within my jurisdiction.
5. In considering this matter I have had regard to all relevant legislation, and the Code.
6. The information I have considered in reaching my decision includes:
  - a. the referral from the local authority dated 20 November 2024, supporting documents and further information provided at my request;
  - b. the determined arrangements for 2025/26 and the proposed variation to those arrangements;
  - c. comments on the proposed variation from the school;
  - d. a map showing the location of the school and other relevant schools; and
  - e. information available on the websites of the local authority, the school and the Department for Education (DfE).

## The proposed variation

7. The proposal is to reduce the PAN from 45 to 30 for entry to YR in 2025/26.
8. Paragraph 3.6 of the Code (as above) requires that admission arrangements, once determined, may only be revised, that is changed or varied, if there is a major change of circumstance or certain other limited and specified circumstances.

## Consideration of proposed variation

9. There is no formal consultation required for a variation and so parents and others do not have the opportunity to express their views. Clearly it is desirable that PAN reductions are made via the process of determination following consultation as the consultation process allows those with an interest to express their views. It also allows for objections to

the adjudicator. None of this is afforded by the variation process and so it is particularly important that the proposed variation is properly scrutinised.

10. I note here that the arrangements for 2026/27 have not yet been determined, and so if the proposed variation for 2025/26 were to be approved, the PAN for 2026/27 could be set at 30 by the local authority without objection save from the governing body of the school. I also note that the local authority is currently in the process of consulting on reducing the PAN for the school for 2026/27. It is consulting on the same reduction in the PAN as requested by this proposed variation, namely a reduction in the PAN from 45 to 30.

11. The major change in circumstances relied upon by the local authority is set out in the request for a variation, which states:

“Since the current PAN of 45 was determined, the school has seen a falling roll particularly affecting Key Stage 1. For the last three years (2022-4), Reception numbers have been 13, 24 and 26 respectively which justifies a PAN of 30.

There is only one housing development planned within the catchment in 2025-6, which consists of 41 homes at Bennells Farm. However, as happened with previous developments, it is unlikely to result in many additional children, due to the high house-prices and a low proportion of social/affordable housing within the plans. Likely intake numbers for the next 5 years at Reception, apart from 2026-7 (31), are all less than 30, ranging from 22-28.

Council Officers and the school will monitor local pre-school numbers.

The school remains flexible and willing to continually review this proposed arrangement.

In addition, since the admissions arrangements were determined, the school has reached a position of significant financial deficit and has required two loans which the school has to pay-back. A reduction in the PAN will help considerably with the school’s recovery plan.”

12. I have accordingly given careful consideration to the latest available data in order to form a view about the sufficiency of school places in the local area if the PAN is reduced from 45 to 30 for 2025/26. I have also considered the demand for places at the school, the reasons given for the variation proposed, the potential effect on parental preference and whether the proposed variation is justified taking into account all relevant circumstances.

13. The local authority has a duty to make sure that there are sufficient places for the children in its area. To fulfil this duty the local authority assesses the likely future number of places to be needed and plans to meet that need. The school is one of six schools in the area that admit pupils to YR. The local authority has provided me with the following data regarding admissions to those schools, together with forecasts for 2025/26 and 2026/27.

**Table 1: The number of children admitted to YR in the school and five nearby schools**

	<b>2022/23</b> <b>(actual)</b>	<b>2023/24</b> <b>(actual)</b>	<b>2024/25</b> <b>(actual)</b>	<b>2025/26</b> <b>(forecast)</b>	<b>2026/27</b> <b>(forecast)</b>
<b>Sum of PANs for YR</b>	248	248	248	238	TBC
<b>Total number of children admitted to YR</b>	158	159	151	163	144
<b>Vacant places</b>	90	89	97	75	
<b>Vacant places as a percentage</b>	36.3	35.9	39.1	31.5	

**If the proposed variation is approved for 2025/26**

<b>Sum of PANs for YR</b>				223	
<b>Vacant places</b>				60	
<b>Vacant places as a percentage</b>				26.9	

14. From the data in table 1, I can see that, over the last few years, there has been a very large number of surplus places in YR in the area. I am satisfied that if the proposed variation for 2025/26 were approved, there would continue to be sufficient places within the local area for any children whose parents are seeking a place for them in YR during 2025/26.

15. Additionally, from the map and supplementary information provided by the local authority, I can see that there is one other school admitting children to YR within two miles of the school and another within three miles. Both of these primary schools have had surplus YR places for the last three years. The forecast data suggests that both schools are also highly likely to have surplus places in 2025/26.

16. I now turn to the demand for places at the school and the reasons given by the local authority and the governing body in support of the variation request. The governing body and the local authority provided similar reasons. In summary, the local authority states:

“Due to low numbers in some KS1 year groups, the school has received significantly reduced pupil-led funding. ... If the school does not enact a variation, the consequences will be that the budget for this financial year and the next will not balance, increasing its pre-existing debt and jeopardising the future sustainability of the school.

In recent years, because the PAN has been 45, the school has had to take more pupils in some year groups which has resulted in classes incorporating two-year

groups. This has caused significant issues for their budget, having to appoint additional teachers which has added pressure to the budget deficit and loan agreement with the Council.

The current PAN has also impacted on curriculum design and delivery, teacher and pupil welfare and the inconsistency in class structure from year-to-year has been a concern for the parent body. The school has not been able to develop a long-term admissions strategy, nor any consistency in its admissions policy, as they have no prior knowledge of pupil numbers from year to year and even within a school year as it has space to take in pupils mid-year.

As a result of the lack of a cap on pupil numbers, they are now very high at Key Stage 2 with classes of 33 pupils. This has placed a strain on staff and pupil welfare, teaching and learning resources and impacted on pupil behaviour.”

**Table 2: The number of children allocated a place in YR at the school**

	<b>2022/23</b> <b>(admitted)</b>	<b>2023/24</b> <b>(admitted)</b>	<b>2024/25</b> <b>(admitted)</b>	<b>2025/26</b> <b>(forecast)</b>	<b>2026/27</b> <b>(forecast)</b>
<b>PAN</b>	45	45	45	45	30*
<b>Number of first preferences</b>	22	24	25	-	-
<b>Number of children</b>	24	26	25	33	25
<b>Vacant places</b>	21	19	20	12	5
<b>Vacant places as a percentage</b>	46.7	42.2	44.4	26.7	16.7

\* Includes proposed PAN reduction currently being consulted upon

**If the proposed variation is approved for 2025/26**

<b>PAN</b>				30	
<b>Vacant places</b>				-3	
<b>Vacant places as a percentage</b>				-10	

17. Table 2 shows that the number of children being admitted to YR at the school over the last three years has been in the mid 20's. However, if the proposed variation is approved, there appears to be a potential shortfall in places in 2025/26 for around three pupils.

18. The data in table 2, provided by the local authority, is in contrast to the local authority's statement that:

"Likely intake numbers for the next 5 years at Reception, apart from 2026-7 (31), are all less than 30, ranging from 22-28".

In response to my enquiry about this point, the local authority said:

"The Council uses two sets of forecasts when planning school places. The 33 ... is derived from our catchment forecasts which show the number of primary-aged children living in a catchment regardless of which school they attend. The [likely intake numbers] show the [likely] number on roll at the school. In the case of Meridian, the roll tends to be slightly less than the number of primary-aged children living in the catchment."

19. The implication of this is that a PAN of 30 for 2025/26 may be sufficient to accommodate the number of children whose parents wish for them to attend the school. However, there remains the possibility that parental preference may be frustrated for a small number of families although there are places available for the children within other local schools. In coming to a decision, I must balance any potential parental frustration against any potential negative impact on the school if the proposed variation is not agreed.

20. With regard to the school's financial situation, the DfE's 'Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool' shows that, in March 2023 the school had an in-year deficit of £66K and a revenue reserve deficit of £36K. In March 2024, the school had an in year deficit of £51K and a revenue reserve deficit of £86K. This picture reflects the concerns about the school's budget raised by the local authority and the governing body, as set out earlier in this determination.

21. As schools are funded, in large part, on a per child basis, a reduction in the number of children admitted will result in a reduction in income. However, the school's financial projections are such that a reduction in PAN for YR from 2025/26 will help mitigate the financial problems the school faces by bringing greater certainty in pupil numbers and, consequently, the number of teaching and support staff required. This will also help the school to develop its longer term admissions strategy.

22. The provisions of the School Admissions (Infant Class Size) (England) Regulations 2012 (the infant class size regulations) apply to the school, and they require that infant classes (those where the majority of children will reach the age of five, six or seven during the school year) must not contain more than 30 pupils with a single qualified school teacher, except in specific exceptional circumstances.

23. The governing body states:

“With a PAN of 30, we will be able to plan our staffing in advance and recruit new staff in a timely manner. We will be able to identify staffing, curriculum and premises needs and costs carefully to ensure we keep within our budget, pay off our loans and not require additional funding. We will be able to have a long-term teaching and learning strategy, without split classes and complicated curriculum design and mapping covering two year groups being taught together; this will also increase parents’ confidence in the school’s planning. We hope we will have a balanced budget and will not require additional loans. Most importantly we will give all children and staff the best teaching and learning experiences.”

24. If the proposed variation for 2025/26 is not agreed, then any in-year admissions will have to be admitted until the number of children admitted to YR is 45. Any such in-year admission could necessitate a reorganisation of classes midway through the year to avoid breaching the infant class size regulations. This situation is likely to present a significant logistical and financial challenge. Also, if the number of children in YR is limited to 30, then the school will be able to plan with certainty that in September 2025 it will need staffing for one YR class.

25. I note that the school has recently been inspected by Ofsted and has been judged as ‘requiring improvement’ in all areas. Greater certainty in the number of pupils being admitted to the school may help to address some of the concerns highlighted, for example in relation to curriculum design and class structure.

26. Taking everything into consideration, I am of the view that, on balance, the potential benefits of the proposed variation, namely to the school’s financial situation and class organisation outweigh the potential negative impact on parental preference which may not arise and, if it does, will only affect only a very small number of families. I, therefore, find that the variation is justified by the circumstances and I approve the proposed variation.

27. Although not directly related to the proposed variation, I would like to address a point of potential confusion raised in the request form. The local authority state:

“As a result of the lack of a cap on pupil numbers, they are now very high at Key Stage 2 with classes of 33 pupils. This has placed a strain on staff and pupil welfare, teaching and learning resources and impacted on pupil behaviour.”

Paragraph 1.4 of the Code is clear that the PAN only applies to the relevant age group, which in this case is YR. Paragraph 1.4 states, in part:

“This means that admission authorities may not refuse admission to other age groups on the grounds that they have already reached their PAN. They may, however, refuse admission where the admission of another child would prejudice the provision of efficient education or efficient use of resources.”

Where classes in other year groups are overly large, to the extent that an additional child would cause a negative impact on the effective delivery of education, or where a school would have to create a new class mid-year with associated additional staffing and resource costs, these may be appropriate reasons for a school to refuse to admit a child in-year on the grounds of prejudice. It should be noted that any such decision could be challenged through the appeals process.

## Determination

28. In accordance with section 88E of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, I approve the proposed variation to the admission arrangements determined by Cambridgeshire County Council for Meridian Primary School for September 2025.

29. I determine that the published admission number for admissions to the reception year in 2025/26 will be 30.

Dated: 13 December 2024

Signed:

Schools adjudicator: Catherine Crooks